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The Federation of South African Women and the 1956 Anti-Pass March

*Reagan Platt*¹

Introduction

In August 1956, over 20,000 women gathered outside the South African Parliament in Pretoria in a demonstration against the extension of pass laws for South African women. These restrictive laws had been a focus for South African women since the 1910s. Still, after the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948 and began to pass legislation that enforced segregation, the need to organize and protest increased dramatically. While segregation had existed in South Africa before the rise of the Nationalist Party, the results of the 1948 election allowed restrictive laws to be put in place that forced every element of life in South Africa to be governed by race, effectively installing a system of apartheid.² South African women showed up *en masse* for the 1956 Anti-Pass March, representatives of all races and classes, protesting in solidarity against laws that aimed to restrict women's movement outside African Reserves. These laws presented the most physical danger to Black women in South Africa, but all women ran the risk of arrest and punishment if they violated movement restrictions.

Despite the massive numbers, the 1956 Anti-Pass March is not as commonly recognized in historical works detailing the period. Many of the scholarly resources I accessed while researching this event dedicated a single sentence to the massive gathering or chose to exclude it from the narrative of 1950s apartheid resistance entirely.³ There are many possible reasons the 1956 Anti-Pass March is not given the same recognition as other events from the period: the protest intentionally obeyed the strict laws to avoid arrests of participating women, was organized and attended exclusively by women and children, and was a single-day event. The protest was also followed closely by the Treason Trial—a drawn-out legal attack against many activists who signed the Freedom Charter denouncing apartheid—the arrests for which were carried out in December of the same year, which likely served to

¹ Reagan Platt is a recent graduate of California State University Channel Islands' history program. Her interests lie in labor history, civil rights history, and women in history.

² Haydn Cornish-Jenkins, "Despite the 1994 Political Victory Against Apartheid, It's Economic Legacy Persists," South African History Online, February 2, 2016, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/despite-1994-political-victory-against-apartheid-its-economic-legacy-persists-haydn-cornish->

³ Books including the following discussed apartheid in depth without impactful acknowledgement of the Anti-Pass March: *The End of Apartheid In South Africa* by Liz Sonneborn; *1956: The World in Revolt* by Simon Hall; *South Africa's Struggle For Human Rights* by Saul Dubow; *Twentieth-Century South Africa* by William Beinart.

overshadow the march in South African history.⁴ Another possible explanation for the relative silence regarding the Anti-Pass March compared to other historical protests of comparable size may be credited to the inaccessibility of primary source material; most primary source documents remain offline and can only be accessed in South Africa by those with special permission—this paper benefits especially from the hard work of Cheryl Walker, a sociologist and historian who accessed South Africa’s archives and published the book *Women and Resistance in South Africa* in 1982. In addition to Walker’s book, I rely heavily on the autobiographical accounts provided by some of the prominent women in the organization; in an attempt to understand the experiences of various women at the time I have consulted the autobiographies of Helen Joseph who was a white leader of FSAW, Lilian Ngoyi who was an African leader of FSAW, and Frances Baard—an African woman who took on an executive role in FSAW. Unfortunately, there is not much information available about the experiences of women who did not hold leadership positions in FSAW, and we can learn most about them from generalized statements in other resources.

The 1956 anti-pass march was incredibly impactful on the movement’s culture, showing South Africans that women had power and that their voices could be heard. The march featured many prominent leaders of the Federation of South African Women, a multiracial coalition formed to give women a voice in the anti-apartheid movement, and is remembered as an incredible feat in women’s history. Now that South Africa has abolished apartheid—though its impacts are still being felt in the economy and many other areas of life in South Africa—increasing efforts are being made to honor this largely erased history and remember the women who protested in August of 1956.⁵

Early Protest Against Passes For Women: The 1913 Anti-Pass Campaign in the Orange Free State

One of the earliest attempts to limit the movement of South African women took place in the Orange Free State in 1913. The other three provinces did not feel a necessity to extend the laws to include women at the time because the population of Black and mixed race women in the urban areas was so small⁶. The Orange Free State chose to include women in their pass laws starting in 1910 because a small portion of the province had been determined an ‘African Reserve,’ a portion of land set aside specifically to house the African population, and a large percentage of the African population in the

⁴ Graham Dominy, “Overcoming the Apartheid Legacy: The Special Case of the Freedom Charter,” *Archival Science* 13:2-3 (June 2013): p. 197.

⁵ Cornish-Jenkins, “Despite the 1994 Political Victory Against Apartheid,” South African History Online.

⁶ Documentation identifies mixed race women as “coloured”, this intentionally identifies that they had different rights and privileges than Black, white, and Indian women.

Orange Free State were living on white land as squatters, sharecroppers, or laborers.⁷ The primary argument against the pass laws for women in 1913 would resurface again in the 1950s: women played a specialized role in the household that men did not. A woman's role as wife and mother meant that her entire family, especially her children, would be endangered if a woman were arrested and unable to return to her home. This argument appealed to whites as well, as African children were expected to grow up and leave the reserves so they could provide cheap labor for white employers, something they could not do if they did not survive.⁸

The new enforcement of the pass laws, combined with outrage over the Native Land Law passed in 1913, led to the creation of the Native and Coloured Women's Association, an organization made up of a mix of Black and mixed-race women.⁹ Later in the year, a group of women from Bloemfontein was arrested while presenting a petition to the mayor, Ivan H. Haarburger, for not having passes. The arrests prompted an act of defiance on 6 June 1913, when hundreds of women marched and demanded an audience with the mayor, sparking similar acts of nonviolent defiance in other towns in the Orange Free State. After their arrests, thirty-four of the women chose not to pay their release fines and instead remained in prison to bring more attention to their cause. Women in other towns followed this example, and eventually, prisons were overwhelmed with the number of women being held. This campaign ultimately led to the creation of the Bantu Women's League, a branch of the recently formed African National Congress (ANC).¹⁰

The Apartheid State and Passes for Women 1948-1956

After the 1948 election placed the Nationalist Party in power, the group began to pass legislation that codified segregation and created the South African Apartheid State. In 1952, the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act, sometimes referred to as the Natives Act, was enacted. The act required women to begin carrying passes and would restrict their movement.¹¹ The initial act did not include a start date for enforcement and full government enforcement of passes for women would not

⁷ Cherryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (Onyx Press Ltd, 1982), pp. 27-28.

⁸ Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 28.

⁹ Union of South Africa, *Natives Land Act, Act No. 27 of 1913*, Policy Documents, Government Printer, 1913. <https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.leg19130619.028.020.027>. ; The Native Land Law passed in 1913 codified the creation of 'African Reserves' and in the Orange Free State forced many workers to choose between full time work on white-owned land or being forced into the incredibly small areas that had been reserved for Africans.

¹⁰ Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 30-32; Hannes J. Haasbroek, *The Native Advisory Board of Bloemfontein: 1913-1923* (Nasionale Museum, 2003) p. 70.

¹¹ Heather Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After* (Pearson Education Ltd, 2001), pp. 23-25.

begin until February of 1963, when any woman caught without her reference book would be charged with a criminal offense.¹² While these restrictions primarily limited the movement of Black and coloured women, activist Helen Joseph reveals in her autobiography *Tomorrow's Sun* that a white woman caught in an African township would also face punishment and possible arrest.¹³ Part of the reason it took over ten years for the Nationalist Party government to fully enforce the pass laws was the intense opposition from women and women's groups. The Anti-Pass Protest that took place in the Orange Free State was an example of the level of reaction the implementation of passes could provoke and one that the government hoped to avoid. The emergence of the Bantu Women's League after the 1913 protest was something the government did not want to see happen again.¹⁴ Nevertheless, very soon after the announcement of the 1952 Pass Laws, another women's group, the Federation of South African Women, formed in 1954.¹⁵ The government began distributing permits in 1954 and reference books in 1956. Similar to the arguments presented against passes for women that took place in 1913, women had significant concerns over the welfare of their children in the case that they should be arrested on a frivolous pass violation that kept them from returning home and caring for their families.¹⁶ As a result of the new requirement and distribution of passes to women, the women's movement began to come together, and the first nonracial National Conference of Women was held in Johannesburg in April of 1954.¹⁷

The Native Laws Amendment Act, an amendment to Article 10 of the pre-existing Urban Areas Act, intended to restrict the movement of women. The legislation stated that any African, including women, needed special permission to remain in an urban area for more than 72 hours unless they met a specific set of requirements. To remain in the urban area for over seventy-two hours without special permission, an African needed to have lived in the area for their entire lives since birth, worked for the same employer there for at least ten years, lived there legally for at least fifteen years previously, or be the wife of someone who met those requirements. While the act was written to imply that most women would not be required to obtain a pass, it included strict stipulations that women would have to prove on the fly to continue living in urban areas. At the same time, it was suggested that even if Africans were part of the group that would not require documented proof of their right to be in the

¹² Elizabeth Schmidt, "Now You Have Touched The Women: African Women's Resistance to the Pass Laws in South Africa 1950-1960," Reports, (United Nations, 1983), pp. 15-16.

¹³ Helen Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, (John Day Company, 1967), pp. 73-74.

¹⁴ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 30-32.

¹⁵ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 153-154.

¹⁶ *You Have Struck a Rock!*, directed by Deborah May, (California Newsreel, 2015), Kanopy Streaming.

¹⁷ Schmidt, "Now You Have Touched The Women," p. 17.

city it would still be in their best interest to carry a pass, to prove they were legally permitted to be there if and when they were stopped by police.¹⁸

A second act passed by the government, the misleadingly named Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act, replaced the term passes with 'reference books' and extended the requirement to carry one to all African adults. While the act appears to have been intentionally named to mislead the African population into believing it was abolishing the pass requirement, it was actually intended to roll out passes in a new form called reference books. Reference books did just as much to limit the movement of African people into urban areas.¹⁹

It is possible that these acts were worded in this way to imply to the Africans who were legally in the urban areas that they were only being told to carry passes or "reference books" because of Africans who were 'breaking the rules'. Promoting discontent and infighting within the African community would assist the government in its attempts to discourage protest groups and organized cooperation. Africans would not be able to focus on resisting an oppressive government if they were focused on directing blame at one another for new oppressive policies. Yet, throughout the early 1950s, there were multiple minor local uprisings and protests against the enforcement of passes, such as in the Odendaalsrus district, where rioting took place and led to forty-seven activists being brought to court, forty-four of whom were women.²⁰ By 1954, an important new group rose in opposition to the passes.

Federation of South African Women

The Federation of South African Women, commonly referred to as FSAW, was formed in April 1954 at the first National Conference of Women held in Johannesburg. The conference was attended by 146 delegates representing over 230,000 women from across South Africa. FSAW was formed as a coalition of other women's groups, including the Women's Branches of the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the Congress of Democrats (COD), and multiple trade unions. The goals of FSAW were outlined in the constitution and focused on full equality and opportunity for women regardless of race or class. The women's charter was also drafted at this first conference and outlined goals regarding enfranchisement, employment equality, paid maternity leave, child care, free/compulsory education for South African children, increased rights surrounding property, marriage, and children, and the removal of any laws that prevented equality.²¹

¹⁸ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 126.

¹⁹ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 126.

²⁰ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 130-131.

²¹ Schmidt, "Now You Have Touched The WomRay Alexander and Hilda Watts, both former members of the now-outlawed Communist Party of South Africa organized the first National Women's Conferenceen," pp. 17-18.

The first National Women's Conference was organized by Ray Alexander and Hilda Watts, both former members of the now-outlawed Communist Party of South Africa. During the planning stage, Alexander and Watts worked to involve as many pre-existing women's groups as possible, including the ANC Women's League (ANCWL), various trade unions, the Transvaal all-women's union, the COD, and the SAIC. Alexander and Watts were both served with banning orders in September 1953 that prohibited their continued union work. Since the orders focused on the stoppage of their union work, they were able to continue planning the National Women's Conference without issue.²²

The Role of Motherhood in FSAW

While the introduction of pass laws for women in South Africa got women involved in political movements on a national scale, for a long time, their focus had been on local-level issues that were actively affecting the men and children around them.²³ Some of the earliest recorded grassroots campaigns women organized and participated in concerned food shortages during WWII, when they pushed for more equitable food rations. These movements introduced women to other liberal groups and showed them that action groups were a viable way to make change in their local areas.²⁴

FSAW appealed to women as mothers and caregivers, meeting women where they were instead of expecting an entire delegation of radicalized women who wanted to topple the patriarchy and unchain themselves from the burden of motherhood. Even the more radical leaders of FSAW acknowledged and understood that most of the women who took part in the various women's leagues and trade unions identified as mothers first and would be most easily rallied around issues that regarded their ability to keep a home, care for their children, and make a better future for their families.²⁵ Frances Baard, a soon-to-be prominent ANCWL organizer and FSAW executive committee member, first became involved with the ANC after being exposed to the terrible condition of the single men's quarters in New Brighton. While she knew about ANC meetings before, she did not feel the urge to attend one and speak up until she saw an opportunity to improve the lives of others.²⁶

The devotion of these mothers to the anti-apartheid cause is best seen in the example of Rahima Moosa at the 1955 women's anti-pass march. Moosa was a representative of the Transvaal Indian Congress and was chosen to be one of the four leaders of the march in October of 1955.²⁷ On

²² Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 138-140.

²³ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 75.

²⁴ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 78-79.

²⁵ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 158-160.

²⁶ Frances Baard, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, (Zimbabwe Publishing House Ltd, 1986), pp. 31-32.

²⁷ "Rahima Moosa," *Rahima Moosa - South, African History Online*, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/rahima-moosa>.

the day of the march, Moosa was days away from childbirth and fraught with anxiety over the possibility of going into labor during the protest; however she stated that “she would be strong enough, the future of her child was the future of all South African children and that her place was there, part of the protest.”²⁸ Moosa’s determination was representative of many of the women attending the marches in 1955 and 1956, intimidated by the daunting task ahead, especially walking into an area so hostile to non-whites, but determined to push forward for the sake of the future of their children and all children living under apartheid.

The Role of Trade Unionism in FSAW

FSAW cannot be discussed without acknowledging the role of trade union leaders in its creation. Trade unionists organized the first National Women’s Conference, which led to the creation of FSAW, and many went on to be invaluable parts of FSAW. The involvement of trade union leaders put the organization at slight risk on occasion, since many of the trade union founders had roots in the Communist Party of South Africa. The CPSA was forced to disband to avoid mass banishment of its members in 1950, and many members pivoted their liberal focus and organizational talents towards trade union work.²⁹ The most notable communist turned trade unionist moving in women’s circles was Ray Alexander, who was later responsible for planning the Women’s Conference and creating FSAW with fellow (ex) communist Hilda Watts before Alexander was banished due to her past CPSA membership.³⁰

The four women who led the 1956 anti-pass march were all involved in union work in one way or another and used their organizational skills and relationships to strengthen the FSAW’s work. Lilian Ngoyi first joined the Garment Workers Union (GWU), where she was elected as a shop stewardess. She was eventually appointed to the executive committee of the African section of the Garment Workers Union. Through connections made in the union, she became involved in the 1952 Defiance Campaign and later on the ANCWL. Lilian credits her organizing and public speaking abilities to her time with the GWU.³¹ Rahima Moosa, a representative of the Transvaal Indian Congress, was elected shop steward of the Cape Town Food and Canning Workers Union in 1943 and later became the branch secretary. Her union involvement led her to get involved in more labor-based politics.³² Sophia Williams-de Bruyn became involved with the Textile Workers Union while she was still attending her primary education, was elected to serve as shop steward, and eventually dropped out of school to work

²⁸ Joseph, *Tomorrow’s Sun*, p. 79.

²⁹ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 96.

³⁰ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 138-139.

³¹ Lilian Ngoyi, “Lilian’s Letters to Belinda Allen,” in *Everyday Matters*, ed. MJ Daymond (Jacana Media, 2016), pp. 273-274.

³² “Rahima Moosa,” Rahima Moosa - South African History Online.

full-time. She became an executive member of the Textile Workers Union in Port Elizabeth and later a founding member of the South African Congress of Trade Unions. In 1955, Williams-de Bruyn was appointed as a full-time organizer of the Coloured People's Congress that had formed to work with the ANC and SAIC through the congress alliance.³³ Helen Joseph, a social worker at the time, took on the job of Secretary of the Transvaal Clothing Industry Medical Aid Society of the Garment Workers' Union, led by Solly Sachs. Sachs had been a member of the now-banned CPSA, and a few years after Joseph's involvement with the union, he would be forced to flee South Africa to avoid persecution. Joseph later served on the provisional committee formed to set up the Congress of Democrats, the white representation in the Congress Alliance. As four of the most influential leaders of the women's movement against apartheid, it is remarkable to look back on their histories and appreciate the foundational organizational training they received through their unionization work.

1955 Anti-Pass March

FSAW had its first national protest on 27 October 1955 when 2,000 women representing all the races in South Africa marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, intending to meet with the cabinet ministers responsible for the apartheid laws. Dr. Verwoerd, the Minister of Native Affairs and the man directly in charge of pass laws and engineering apartheid, refused to meet with the women because their group was multiracial.³⁴ Any multiracial gathering was forbidden and would not be recognized by the government, as one of the key elements of apartheid was dividing members of South African society based on race.

The 1955 march prepared the FSAW for many of the obstacles and issues that would arise when transporting a large number of women into the area to march. Inspired by a recent protest by the women of the Black Sash, an all-white women's organization against apartheid due to its violation of the constitution, FSAW's August meeting decided to hold a mass march.³⁵ FSAW was very determined that the meeting would not be for African women only. Apartheid affected women of every race, and they intended for their protest to present a united, multiracial front.³⁶ The original purpose of the march was to demonstrate against five main issues: "Bantu Education, the Group Areas Act, so-called site-and-service housing schemes...the erosion of civil liberties and the Population Registration Act." However, when the government announced in September of 1955 that it intended to begin issuing

³³ "Sophia Theresa Williams de Bruyn," Sophia Theresa Williams de Bruyn - South African History Online, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sophia-theresa-williams-de-bruyn>.

³⁴ Schmidt, *Now You Have Touched The Women*, pp. 18-19.

³⁵ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 184-185.

³⁶ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 71-72.

reference books the following January, the protest prioritized the anti-pass movement as the primary issue.³⁷

During the planning period for the 1955 march, Helen Joseph, secretary of FSAW, and Bertha Mashaba, secretary of the ANCWL, left work each evening and immediately began traveling to different towns to spread information about the planned march. The two faced constant threat of arrest as they traveled into restricted areas at night. Joseph was a white woman who was not permitted in the African Townships after dark, and Mashaba, traveling alongside her, took on the same level of risk. Although Joseph and Mashaba often arrived late to some of their meetings late at night, the women's groups were always there waiting. The job of the women's groups, usually representatives from the women's branches of the ANC, SAIC, and COD, was to take leaflets to distribute to local women and encourage them to attend the march, whether they were congress members or not.³⁸

The 1955 protest faced many setbacks, primarily due to a government that did not want it to happen. FSAW approached Cabinet ministers for an interview, but they refused to engage. The town clerk declined authorization for a public meeting outside of the Union Buildings or an organized procession through Pretoria, claiming that the events would create a disturbance and provoke a hostile racialized situation.³⁹ To get around the government restriction on gathering, it was planned that every single woman attending would carry her own letter of protest against the unjust laws, all under the guise of delivering these letters to the Capitol Buildings, unrelated to the other women who all happened to be doing the same thing.⁴⁰

Transportation presented another level of difficulty, as a combination of police and public transport officials attempted to block the women from reaching Pretoria in any way that they could. Women traveling from Johannesburg and other towns had all previously arranged chartered buses and trucks and obtained transport licenses. Two days before the march, when the planning had been completed, all of the transport licenses were revoked. Emergency meetings were held in every town, hastily to raise funds so the women could still attend the march, now travelling by train. In order to avoid additional obstacles, men purchased the tickets for the women, and even then, at certain stations, they were refused by booking clerks who said no tickets were being sold for Pretoria. Many women had to walk to the nearest station and try again, ordering a ticket for Johannesburg and paying the additional fees to reach Pretoria once they were safely boarded.⁴¹

Despite the original intention for each woman to deliver her own letter and move on, maintaining their legal excuse for all being at the Capitol buildings, the women reached the top of the

³⁷ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 185.

³⁸ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 73-74.

³⁹ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 186.

⁴⁰ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, p. 77.

⁴¹ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 77-78

steps and decided to stay. FSAW had not dared to suggest occupying the Capitol Building amphitheater, fearing it would be too dangerous, but the women at the march took the initiative and did it anyway. The government officials did not even have an excuse to dismiss the women based on racial separation since there were no 'white only' signs posted; officials assumed it was a given. The four leaders of the march-- Ngoyi, Joseph, Moosa, and Williams-de Bruyn-- all delivered the piles of protest letters to the offices of the Cabinet Ministers who fled from the scene so as not to receive them.⁴²

1956 Anti-Pass March in Pretoria

The women of FSAW in the Transvaal proposed a much larger march during their regional meeting, organized to celebrate National Women's Day on 8 March 1956. Notably, National Women's Day later came to be celebrated on August 9 in honour of the women's march to Pretoria. FSAW reached out to the Prime Minister in July to request an interview, but received no response and decided to go on with the protest anyway.⁴³

In preparation, Helen Joseph, Bertha Mashaba, Robert Resha, and Norman Levy were sent out to spread word of the protest and speak to as many organizations as possible to boost attendance. Joseph estimates that over two weeks, they "traveled over three thousand miles and...addressed forty-three meetings." Women across the country responded enthusiastically to the idea of the march, leaping headfirst into planning and immediately beginning to raise funds to afford the trip. Women were so determined that when questioned by men in their organizations on how they would get there if they couldn't raise the money, they vowed to sell their furniture. While the statement may have been slightly exaggerated, it helped show how determined the women were and made men more willing to assist and let the women take the lead in planning.⁴⁴

The days leading up to the march saw women pouring into Pretoria and Johannesburg, gathering from all parts of South Africa. While the march was planned to be as safe as possible for participants, it also relied heavily on the women's discipline. Some men of the Congress Alliance questioned the four leaders' ability to control a crowd of 20,000 women, but FSAW leaders insisted that the women would take no action that put others or the protest in danger. They even had plans for the very possible outcome that all four leaders of the march might be arrested and dragged off before they could reach the Capitol building, for alternates and secondary alternates were selected and given explicit instructions on what to do in that case.⁴⁵ All women were to sign and carry a letter of protest, using a loophole to get around the restriction on public gatherings as they had in 1955. The letter was

⁴² Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 80-81.

⁴³ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 194.

⁴⁴ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 88-89.

⁴⁵ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 89-90.

written up by FSAW, and over 14,000 copies were produced by the Indian Youth League.⁴⁶ The letters carried a message of solidarity, reminding the governor that women of all races and backgrounds were coming together against passes and that they vowed not to rest until pass laws in *all* forms had been abolished.⁴⁷

The March

On 9 August 1956, over 20,000 Black, white, ‘coloured’, and Indian women marched to the Capitol buildings in Pretoria. The march was led by Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, and Sophie Williams-de Bruyn and was carried out to protest the pass requirements for women in South Africa.⁴⁸ While the leaders walked in a group of four, all the marchers behind them followed in groups of two or three since local authorities had banned the gathering of any larger group.⁴⁹ The march had intentionally been planned for a Thursday, since it was usually the ‘maid’s day off’ and more women who worked in domestic homes would be able to attend.⁵⁰ As they arrived at the entrance to the Capitol Building amphitheater, the four leaders stood and collected the signed letters of protest to be deposited in the Prime Minister’s office. When all the women had finally entered, the crowd split and allowed a pathway for Ngoyi, Joseph, Moosa, and Williams-de Bruyn to pass through the packed area.⁵¹ So many women had arrived at the march that they had run out of protest letters to hand out. The four leaders of the march, along with a few helpers, such as Frances Baard, carried the letters into the building and knocked on the Prime Minister’s door. As in the previous year, the Prime Minister was not there to greet them, but that did not slow the women down. They filled his office with the letters, covering the desks and chairs before returning to the waiting crowd of women.⁵²

Many of the women had sat down during the procession into the amphitheater, which took over two hours, and when the leaders emerged from the building the entire crowd stood back up.

⁴⁶ Rayda Becker, “The New Monument to the Women of South Africa,” *African Arts* 33:4 (Winter 2000): p. 4.

⁴⁷ Federation of South African Women, *The Demand of the Women of South Africa for the Withdrawal of Passes for Women and the Repel for Pass Laws*, petition letter, August 9, 1956, from South African History Online, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/09August/petition.htm> (Accessed August 25, 2025).

⁴⁸ *South Africa: The Icons Behind the 1956 Women’s March*, produced by Esther Ogola (BBC News, 2020).

⁴⁹ Joseph, *Tomorrow’s Sun*, p. 91.

⁵⁰ Becker, “The New Monument to the Women of South Africa,” p. 4.

⁵¹ Joseph, *Tomorrow’s Sun*, pp. 91-92.

⁵² Joseph, *Tomorrow’s Sun*, pp. 92-93; Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 195; Baard, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, p. 59.

Raising their hands in the Congress salute, the crowd listened as Ngoyi explained that Prime Minister Strijdom had refused to see them.⁵³ Ngoyi then instructed them to stand in silent protest for 30 minutes. And they did so, notwithstanding the massive crowd and the children present. After half an hour of complete silence, Lilian Ngoyi began singing the ANC anthem, ‘Nkosi sikeleli Africa’ (God Bless Africa). The women in the crowd joined her, and they all sang together before beginning to exit the amphitheater.⁵⁴ In a 2004 interview of fourteen women who took part in the 1956 March, Dorothy Masenya reflected on the enthusiastic energy of the women who attended the march—herself included—and mentioned the possibility that no arrests took place due to the massive turnout and an unwillingness by the government to attempt to imprison so many. In the same interview, Rahaba Mahlakedi Moektesti spoke about how comfortable she and other women felt bringing their children to the event, stating that “many women had their children with them during the March,” some even being carried on the backs of their mothers or caregivers.⁵⁵

While the Prime Minister refused to witness the mass protest, the women of FSAW saw his lack of recognition as a sign of their power and his cowardice. Many in attendance considered it the highlight of their political careers, scaring the Prime Minister out of his own office. A song composed to mark the occasion included the statement “Strijdom, you have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock”, a line that would become representative of the women’s anti-pass movement and the determination of the women to fight against passes for years to come.⁵⁶

The Defiance Campaign and the 1956 Women’s March

The Defiance Campaign of 1952 is likely the closest comparison to the 1956 women’s march. That campaign also took on a multi-racial quality and had to do with occupying space in a way that was inconvenient to the Nationalist Party to protest apartheid law. Still, the Defiance Campaign is more prominent in the shared memory of the 1950s in South Africa, despite fewer demonstrators involved.

The Defiance Campaign was a civil disobedience movement launched on 26 June 1952 and continued for six months. The idea of the campaign was for demonstrators to openly defy discriminatory Nationalist Party legislation, in this case, defying the laws that had separate public

⁵³ Liberal Party of South Africa (Pietermaritzburg), and Brown, P. M. “Contact, Aug. 1956.” *Contact*, August 1956. <https://jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.1810.2050.000.000.aug1956>.

⁵⁴ Joseph, *Tomorrow’s Sun*, p. 93; Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 195.

⁵⁵ “Four Interviews: March Veterans,” by The South African National Oral History Pilot Project, *South African History Online*, 2000, oral interview, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/09August/interviews.htm> (accessed August 25, 2025).

⁵⁶ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 195.

amenities for Africans and Europeans.⁵⁷ The mass arrests that ensued served to draw more widespread attention to the anti-apartheid movement while also inconveniencing the Nationalist government by overfilling their jails. Protesters used the white area of the post office, rode white-only trains, and intentionally ignored the permits and regulations that typically controlled entrance into African townships.⁵⁸ The Defiance Campaign still had some significant differences from the later Women's March, the largest being that while multi-racial, the Defiance Campaign also involved both male and female protesters, whereas the 1956 March was only women. The Defiance Campaign also lasted longer and spanned a larger area, likely making it a more prominent part of the general public's memory due to its timeline and the ability of more people to see it in action. Another significant contrast between the Defiance Campaign and the Women's Anti-Pass March was that the Defiance Campaign, intentionally, resulted in the arrest of the protesters, while the Women's March was specifically formatted to avoid any reason for police involvement.⁵⁹ The Defiance Campaign also served to introduce many people to the ANC and its goals, boosting its formal membership up to 100,000 after the Defiance Campaign.⁶⁰

Significantly, multiple prominent women in FSAW participated in the Defiance Campaign, and for some, it served as their introduction into the ANC and anti-apartheid protest. Lilian Ngoyi observed ANC members participating in the Defiance Campaign and was deeply impressed by their bravery and willingness to sacrifice their personal comfort for the betterment of their people. Ngoyi joined and immediately registered to take part in the defiance movement. She chose to enter the white section of her local post office, attempting to send a letter to the Prime Minister sharing her thoughts about his apartheid policies. Ngoyi was arrested, spent a night in jail, and was released on bail before being found not guilty at a later court hearing. Ngoyi stayed loyal to the ANC and quickly joined the ANC Women's League.⁶¹ Future FSAW member Frances Baard also took part in the Defiance Campaign; however, her experience differed from Ngoyi's. Baard was already a member of the ANC, and when it came time to start civil disobedience, Baard was told that her best contribution actually would be to stay out of jail and watch the children and homes of those who would be going out to defy. Baard took on a caretaker role in the Defiance Campaign, checking on elderly neighbors, caring for children while their parents were jailed, and making sure that rent was paid and nobody lost their homes for the cause.⁶² Part of the reason the Defiance Campaign was able to have the visibility that it

⁵⁷ "Defiance Campaign 1952," Defiance Campaign 1952 - South African History Online, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/defiance-campaign-1952>.

⁵⁸ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p. 87.

⁵⁹ "Defiance Campaign 1952" Defiance Campaign 1952 - South African History Online.

⁶⁰ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 87-88.

⁶¹ Ngoyi, *Everyday Matters*, pp. 273-274

⁶² Baard, *My Spirit is Not Banned*, pp. 40-42.

did, showing people getting arrested and carted off to jail, was due to the work of members like Frances Baard, who helped ensure that participation in the campaign would not ruin people's lives.

Repercussions

Perhaps the most well-known event of 1956 was the mass arrest that preceded the infamous Treason Trial in December 1956. Anyone who had shown public support for the Freedom Charter—a document containing anti-apartheid sentiment that demanded equality of rights for all South Africans, including employment, education, and governance— was vulnerable.⁶³ In total, 156 ANC and Congress Alliance leaders were charged with treason, because the Freedom Charter was a communist document and violated the Communist Suppression Act of 1950.⁶⁴ Multiple leaders of FSAW were charged during the trial, including march leaders Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph and prominent organizers Bertha Mashaba and Frances Baard. The trial stretched on for four years, and while some cases against the accused were dismissed along the way, the Nationalist government kept Ngoyi and Joseph under charges until the end, when charges against all defendants had to be rejected as there wasn't a viable case.⁶⁵

Despite the Treason Trial collapsing, many of the women involved in FSAW and the other anti-apartheid movements would continue to face banning orders that kept them trapped within their homes or exile that removed them from South Africa without the possibility of return under the Nationalist Government. The Sharpeville Massacre—an explosion of police violence against protesters that resulted in sixty-nine deaths— took place on 21 March 1960 and led to the passage of the Unlawful Organizations Act the same year. This act effectively banned the organizing of any anti-government, and by extension anti-apartheid, groups and provided government authority to arrest anyone suspected of gathering in such a group. This event also marks the decline of participation in and action from FSAW, with its 'parent organizations' dissolved, they struggled with numbers, many of their leaders were forced out or imprisoned which left the organization temporarily directionless, and there was a massive risk of imprisonment and banning for those who did choose to continue gathering in secret.⁶⁶

⁶³ The Freedom Charter, June 26, 1955, in *Digital Innovation South Africa*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/al.sff.document.pos00000000.043.053.1594>

⁶⁴ Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa*, p. 30.

⁶⁵ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 96-109.

⁶⁶ Walker, *Women and Resistance*, pp. 267-268,.

Lilian Ngoyi

Lilian Ngoyi was arrested in December 1956 with other Treason Trial defendants and taken to the prison in Johannesburg.⁶⁷ During the course of the trial she was forced into solitary confinement for nineteen days in 1960 as a result of the state of emergency declared after the events of Sharpeville.⁶⁸ The prosecution also required Ngoyi to remain in Pretoria, far from her work, and forced her to leave her job and the Garment Workers Union. Ngoyi was one of two women who suffered to the very end of the trial as one of the final thirty-one accused and not dismissed. After her dismissal, Ngoyi addressed FSAW's third national conference and a few weeks later was served with banning orders.⁶⁹

Ngoyi was banned from attending any public meetings in 1962, and the ban was escalated in 1963 to confine her to her home in the Orlando West township. The ban kept her out of political movements and separated her from any connections she had made during her time with the FSAW and ANC, while also cutting her income stream. Ngoyi was not permitted to return to a public garment factory, and due to the constant police presence and surveillance, she struggled to take on private customers. The house she lived in was incredibly bare-bones, described by Ngoyi as a cement box that froze in the winter and heated to unbearable levels in the summer. She had no amenities, not even a bathroom, in the three-room house that she would eventually share with her daughter and grandson.⁷⁰

When Ngoyi's ban was set to expire in November of 1972, on the last day of that month, special branch men visited her home to inform her that at midnight the ban would expire and was not set for renewal.⁷¹ Ngoyi took a holiday first to Durban to visit the grave of Chief Albert Luthuli, with whom she had worked alongside in the ANC. She was anxious to pay her respects as she had not been permitted to break her ban for his funeral. She returned home briefly before traveling to Cape Town, where she was permitted to visit Nelson Mandela, who was serving a life sentence on Robben Island.⁷²

Then Ngoyi's ban was unexpectedly reinstated in 1975, another five-year sentence until May 1980.⁷³ During her second banning, Ngoyi's health began to decline.⁷⁴ Renewed demonstrations in

⁶⁷ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, p. 96.

⁶⁸ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 106-107; Ngoyi, *Everyday Matters*, p. 283.

⁶⁹ Barbara Caine, "The Trials and Tribulations of Black Woman Leader: Lilian Ngoyi and the South African Liberation Struggle," in *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, ed. Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis, and Krassimira Daskalova, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 97.

⁷⁰ Caine, *Women's Activism*, pp. 97-98.

⁷¹ Ngoyi, *Everyday Matters*, p. 285.

⁷² Ngoyi, *Everyday Matters*, pp. 289-292.

⁷³ Ngoyi, *Everyday Matters*, p. 300; Caine, *Women's Activism*, pp. 99-100.

⁷⁴ Ngoyi, *Everyday Matters*, pp. 299-300.

1976 against the Bantu Education Act, which had been extended to require all instruction to be given in Afrikaans, increased Ngoyi's stress, as her grandson was part of the protests taking place in Soweto. Demonstrations occurred in the township where Ngoyi lived, and in August of 1977, as she watched her own grandson and other children brutalized by police, yet unable to leave her property or do anything, she collapsed due to stress and had to receive medical attention.⁷⁵

In 1977, Ngoyi was finally able to draw attention to the financial struggles she was facing and additional aid was provided to her through the Amnesty Committee. This charity group had provided the bulk of Ngoyi's income during her ban. A visit from the Christian Institute of South Africa in May helped her live more comfortably, with new furniture, spectacles she had needed for years, a new stove, and funds to send her grandson to school. Nevertheless, her health deteriorated quickly in 1979, and her daughter was forced to stop working to care for her. Ngoyi passed away on the 20th of March 1980, just two months before her second ban was set to expire. The ANC arranged an elaborate funeral in Johannesburg and other events to honor Ngoyi and her contributions to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.⁷⁶ Lilian Ngoyi was aware of the struggle and torment that she and other women who chose to protest pass laws and other apartheid policies might face; she decided to accept the risks her activism presented with the hope and belief that her actions might someday lead to change in South Africa.

Helen Joseph

Helen Joseph was charged with treason and arrested on 6 December 1956, alongside many other ANC and Congress Alliance members. Her office was scoured, during which time she was permitted to give instructions on how to continue her work before being taken to the Johannesburg prison. Joseph considered herself lucky during the trial as her job was close enough that she was able to work before and after court sessions. Four months into the treason trial, Joseph was served with banning orders, preventing her from attending any gatherings that were not social, religious, or educational and requiring her to stay in Johannesburg for the next five years.⁷⁷ While the banishment orders were still harsh punishments, it should be noted that her banishment was much less severe than that of her closest African counterpart, Lilian Ngoyi.

Joseph received the same time in solitary confinement as Ngoyi due to the 'state of emergency' claimed by the Nationalist government after the Sharpeville incident. Joseph had more freedoms during the trial, including access to her own car that she would use to transport herself and other accused who worked locally, whereas others had to be transported in an overfilled bus from the

⁷⁵ Caine, *Women's Activism*, pp. 100-101.

⁷⁶ Caine, *Women's Activism*. pp. 101-102.

⁷⁷ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 95-100; 104-110.

non-white townships they had been sequestered in over fifty miles away. Joseph was found not guilty in 1961 and permitted to return to everyday life.

After the Treason Trial ended, Joseph began investigating individuals who had been exiled or banished during the Nationalist Party's reign. Joseph and a few others reached out to them at first through letters, later on going on a tour to give financial aid to the people who had been banished and were barely escaping poverty.⁷⁸ This work did not go unnoticed by the government, which responded harshly. After her return from the tour, she was served with the first-ever house arrest in October 1962, to expire 31 October 1967.⁷⁹ While other white activists would be served with house arrest later on, Joseph was the only one for an extended period of time, likely due to her public involvement with FSAW and the anti-pass campaigns. Joseph was served with what came to be called 'twelve-hour house arrest'. She could not leave her home at all on public holidays; she had to remain there from 2:30 pm on Saturday until 6:30 am the following Monday, and had only the twelve hours (6:30 am-6:30 pm) before she had to return home on weekdays. Joseph was prevented from attending any social gatherings and was required to report to the police station every day between midday and 2:00 pm. Failure to report to the police station within the two hours would result in a minimum sentence of twelve months in prison.⁸⁰

Four days before her banning orders were set to expire, on 27 October 1967, Joseph received a visit from the security police who served her a ban renewal for another five years.⁸¹ After the renewal of her house arrest, Joseph decided to register to earn the external Bachelor of Divinity degree from the University of London, something to take up her time while she was stuck at home. Many special arrangements had to be made for Joseph to take the examinations and submit the required forms.⁸²

In 1971, Joseph began to receive death threats, more than she had been in the past, and in May of 1971, her dog managed to alert her to a bomb that had been attached to her front gate, to blow up her car when she opened it to leave. Joseph's close brush with death brought to the forefront another issue she had been ignoring: a growing suspicion that she was suffering from breast cancer. While Joseph had been aware of the tumor and suspected its malignancy for a while, she had chosen not to seek treatment with the idea that her death might bring public attention to the cruelty of bannings and house arrests. However, after the incident with the bomb, she made the choice to go to the hospital and be operated on. Preparing to have surgery required multiple request forms to be submitted to the magistrate and various hoops to jump through. After her surgery, multiple publications criticized the government for keeping Joseph under house arrest, accusing them of cowardice and intense cruelty. As

⁷⁸ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 110-120.

⁷⁹ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 224-235.

⁸⁰ Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, pp. 235-271.

⁸¹ Helen Joseph, *Side By Side*, (William Morrow & Co, 1987), p. 143.

⁸² Joseph, *Side by Side*, p.144-146.

a result, Joseph's house arrest was lifted early, and she entered a period of freedom.⁸³ Many times throughout her life, Helen Joseph received lighter punishment because of her race, and she used that privilege to continue helping others through her organization and leadership.

Returning to the outside world, Joseph found that many of the organizations she had been part of had been banned or had become ineffective due to so many members being banned. She was elected Honorary National President of the new National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). However, she quickly found that, as a listed person, she was not permitted to hold office in any organization that spoke to the government at all and had to resign her position. NUSAS accepted her resignation but did not fill the position, and she operated as the Honorary National Un-President for two years and the Honorary National Un-Vice President for multiple years after.⁸⁴

Joseph was able to return to public speaking with NUSAS, even though legally none of her speeches could be shared or quoted, and spent a long time organizing for the group. Once again, on 25 June 1980, Joseph was served with banning orders that restricted her from addressing any political gathering or any gathering of students at all, effectively taking away her ability to address the members of NUSAS for the next two years.⁸⁵ Joseph's ban expired on 1 July 1982, and was not renewed, finally giving her the ability to begin speaking publicly and addressing politically active students once more.⁸⁶ She continued her activism for multiple years and passed away on 25 December 1992.⁸⁷

Conclusion: The Long Game and the 1956 March

After the official transfer of government power to the ANC in 1994 with the first South African election that included the African vote, the women of FSAW and the women's march began to garner more attention.⁸⁸ Many of the prominent women who suffered banning or banishment because of their political work were not honored in their lifetimes. However, today's monuments and dedications help to remind the citizens of South Africa of their courage and sacrifice. South Africa continues to grapple with this past and to honor the women who were a rock of resistance to white supremacy. Women such as Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, and Frances Baard have all been given posthumous public recognition for their contributions to the South African freedom movement.

On 1 April 1997, JG Strijdom Hospital was renamed the Helen Joseph Hospital. Built in 1962, the hospital was initially named after Prime Minister Strijdom, a strong supporter of apartheid in

⁸³ Joseph, *Side by Side*, pp. 149-153.

⁸⁴ Joseph, *Side by Side*, pp. 165-166.

⁸⁵ Joseph, *Side by Side*, pp. 167-202.

⁸⁶ Joseph, *Side by Side*, p. 235

⁸⁷ "Helen Joseph," Helen Joseph - South African History Online, accessed August 24, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/helen-joseph>.

⁸⁸ Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa*, pp. 106-108.

South Africa. The renaming of the hospital to honor a woman who fought tirelessly against him and apartheid is incredibly fitting.⁸⁹ Another step towards honoring these women in the modern day was practically handed to the South African government when an underground parking garage beneath the formerly known Strijdom Square collapsed and caused the apartheid leader's bust to be destroyed in 2001. When the area was rebuilt, it was renamed Lilian Ngoyi Square in honor of her leadership during the 1956 Anti-Pass March in Pretoria.⁹⁰ Prominent FSAW organizer Frances Baard was honored in 2001 when the district of Kimberly was renamed the Frances Baard Municipality. Baard had been born in Kimberly in October of 1909, almost 100 years earlier.⁹¹ In August of 2009, a monument honoring her participation in the 1956 anti-pass march was unveiled in the district, the pedestal engraved with her most famous quote: "My spirit is not banned - I still say I want freedom in my lifetime."⁹² Rahima Moosa continues to be recognized for her contributions to the women's anti-apartheid movement, specifically the 1956 women's march. In 2008, the Coronation Hospital of Johannesburg was renamed the Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital, especially fitting as during the 1955 anti-pass march to Pretoria, Moosa was days away from giving birth and was fueled in her determination to march by the thoughts of a better future for her child.⁹³

Perhaps the most publicly noticed memorial to the 1956 Women's March was inaugurated on National Women's Day, August 9, in the year 2000. Coordinated by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology, the monument is a tribute to all the women who came together in 1956 to march against the passes. The designers took heavy influence from the phrase "you strike the woman, you strike the rock", constructing grinding stones, also called *imbokodo*, that represented the slow and often grinding efforts by women for freedom from apartheid. The monument also includes metal

⁸⁹ "Helen Joseph Hospital-Auckland Park, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa," South African Doctors, accessed August 23, 2024, https://doctors-hospitals-medical-cape-town-south-africa.blaauwberg.net/hospitals_clinics_state_hospitals/state_public_hospitals_clinics_gauteng_south_africa/helen_joseph_hospital_auckland_park_johannesburg_gauteng_south_africa.

⁹⁰ "South Africa's Street Signs, Place Names Lead to More Struggle," The Star, May 28, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20160422000416/http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2010/05/28/south_africa_street_signs_place_names_lead_to_more_struggle.html.

⁹¹ "Frances Baard," Francis Baard- South African History Online, accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/frances-baard>.

⁹² "Frances Baard, South African Teacher and Union Activist born," African American Registry, accessed August 23, 2024, <https://aaregistry.org/story/frances-baard-south-african-teacher-and-union-activist-born/>.

⁹³ "Three Hospitals in Gauteng Renamed," Mail & Guardian, September 29, 2008, <https://mg.co.za/article/2008-09-29-three-hospitals-in-gauteng-renamed/>; Joseph, *Tomorrow's Sun*, p. 79.

displays that contain key words and phrases from the letters of protest that were deposited at the Capitol buildings on the day, and an auditory element, with the words “you strike the women, you strike the rock” being played in the eleven official languages of South Africa.⁹⁴ The women of South Africa and their role in resistance to apartheid and white supremacy are slowly garnering the long-overdue attention they deserve.

⁹⁴ Becker, “The New Monument to the Women of South Africa,” p. 1, pp. 4-9.